

# FAMOUS AMERICAN DUELS

## I. DECATUR-BARRON

BY EDGAR ALLEN FORBES

**T**HAT two expert gunmen could face each other at a distance of only eight or ten steps, shoot with deliberate aim, and both not be killed, that is one of the surprising facts about dueling. And in the duels where one of the men was killed it was often the case that the wrong man died. So it was when Commodore Stephen Decatur met Captain James Barron at Bladensburg, Maryland, on the morning of March 22, 1820.

There was no real reason why the two men should fight. It had happened twelve years before that Decatur had been appointed a member of the court that found Barron guilty of neglect of duty in surrendering the Chesapeake to the British Leopard. (The fact that Barron was not wholly to blame matters little now.) He was suspended from the service for five years, without pay. This was the first cause of the duel.

The second grew out of the War of 1812. Captain Barron's suspension had ended five months after the beginning of hostilities, and he was then abroad. His failure to return and offer his services to the Secretary of the Navy was regarded by Decatur and other officers as an unpardonable sin. So, when Barron later applied for readmission to the service, his reinstatement was opposed by Decatur, who was then serving with Commodore Rodgers and Porter as a Navy Commissioner. In a subsequent letter to Barron Decatur explains how they felt about it:

I have entertained, and do still entertain, the opinion that your conduct since the affair of the Chesapeake [the word "conduct" refers to Barron's absence during the War of 1812] has been such as ought forever to bar your readmission to the service. . . . All the officers of your grade, your superiors as well as inferiors (with the exception of one who is your junior), concur in the opinion that you ought not to be employed again.

This made Barron very bitter, and his grievance against Decatur irritated him like a pebble in his shoe. He was aching for a fight. Decatur had no aches of that kind; but he was not a man to flinch when a quarrel was thrown at his head. He felt very much as Alexander Hamilton had felt about meeting Aaron Burr, as was shown in a letter from Decatur to Barron five months before the duel:

I do not think that fighting duels, under any circumstances, can raise the reputation of any man, and have long since discovered that it is not even an unerring criterion of personal courage. I should regret the necessity of fighting with any man; but, in my opinion, the man who makes arms his profession is not at liberty to decline an invitation from any person who is not so far degraded as to be beneath his notice.

At the end of the letter he inserted a stinger to the effect that if Barron were so eager for a fight, he had missed some fine chances in the War of 1812.

The duel correspondence ran along from June 12, 1819, to February 6, 1820, with Decatur trying to avoid a meeting and at the same time not disowning himself as an officer and a gentleman. Barron's letters do their writer's memory little credit. In one of them he insisted that Decatur had challenged him and thereby given him a choice of weapons.

When Decatur's patience had all oozed out, he sent Barron a letter in which he said, "If we fight, it must be of your own seeking," and in closing he said that he would pay no attention to any further communication except a direct call to the field. Barron's reply was vague and contradictory. Decatur answered by writing this, "If you intended it as a challenge, I accept."

About this time Barron became ill; but he recovered. The details were then arranged by Captain Jesse Elliott, Barron's second, and Captain William Bainbridge, representing Decatur.

But before they fight, it is well for us to take a backward look at the clear-cut shadow which the tall, graceful figure of Stephen Decatur had cast on American naval history.

His career had begun in 1798 as a midshipman on the old frigate Constitution. He was then a handsome lad of nineteen, with his whole heart in his work. Then, as always, he was very popular as an officer. Merit brought him within a year to a Lieutenant's grade, and his efficiency was so marked in the brief trouble with France that when Congress retired most of the navy's officers in 1801 Decatur was retained.

Within three years from the day he entered the service Decatur was in his second war. This time it was with the insolent Pasha of Tripoli, one of the worst rascals never hung. Lieutenant Decatur went out in the Essex; but



Painting by Sidney H. Riesenbergs

later served in the frigate New York, commanded by Captain James Barron—the man he was eventually to fight.

The conspicuously brilliant exploit of the whole campaign was performed by young Decatur. Captain Bainbridge had the misfortune to run the frigate Philadelphia aground in the harbor of Tripoli, and it fell into the enemy's hands. Decatur and a volunteer crew boldly bumped up against it by a clever ruse, set it on fire, and all escaped back to the squadron, although 141 guns tried to hit them. Lord Nelson, England's naval hero, called it "the most daring act of the age." Decatur was promptly made a full Captain, the youngest in the American navy; and when the young Captain of twenty-five came home in command of the Constitution (the frigate in which he first sailed) his welcome was enough to gladden any man's heart.

In the War of 1812 he added luster to his name (which was then Commodore Decatur); and then sailed again for

the Mediterranean, and put the finishing touches on the Barbary pirates at Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli. For this he received the thanks of all Europe. This was his last service on the high seas. When he came home in 1816 he began his shore duties as Navy Commissioner,—the line of duty which he was to die. Come we now to the closing days of his brilliant and heroic life.

On the morning of March 22, 1820, Decatur rose earlier than Washington and walked to a hotel on Capitol Hill, where he had a cheerful breakfast with his friend Captain Bainbridge. Then the two men took a carriage and drove rapidly to Bladensburg, Maryland, and met Barron's party. The formal exchange of courtesies was soon over, and the seconds measured off the ground about nine o'clock. Since Barron was near-sighted, Decatur made no objection to the distance being eight paces instead of ten. As the principals took their places Barron remarked that he began